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The Forum Can Set You Free While In Prison, Inmates Say Program called 'pretty tough stuff'

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BUENA VISTA — "I raped her," Tattoo Chairez says, "because I wanted to ruin my father's day."

Tattoo's high-pitched voice and short stature are why he was nicknamed after the character in the Fantasy Island television show. Tattoo has been in the Buena Vista Correctional Facility for two years. He will be eligible for parole in 1992.

"I raped that woman because I was angry," he says. "Rape is a crime of anger. It was somehow to make my father pay for what he did . . ."

Later, Tattoo would tell how his father had abused him.

On the day of the rape, Tattoo said, he was drunk. "I didn't remember it the next day. I thought it was a dream. . . I felt a lot of hurt and shame for my crime; a lot of disbelief I did anything like that."

Tattoo has just completed an intense, confrontational group-counseling program at the prison. Ideally, inmates gain insights into themselves that become the basis for permanent change. Through emotional conversation with the course leader, they peel away their tough exteriors and examine why they are criminals.

Tattoo insists that the 4-1/2 day seminar has changed his life.

The long-range goal of the program, call The Forum, is to reduce recidivism and to end the need to build more prisons, says Steve Randolph of Cascade. He is the Colorado area director for the Michigan-based Prison Possibilities Inc. The non-profit organization raised \$16,000 to help bring the program to the medium-security prison here. The Department of Corrections paid the balance of the \$25,000 program.

The Forum is an experiment in a Colorado prison system devastated by overcrowding. The state's 14 prisons are at 135 percent capacity: 4,873 inmates are in prisons designed for 3,538 prisoners.

Colorado Department of Corrections officials, who are allowed to observe part of the program, praise it.

"I've never seen a program this intense. I've never seen any program as demanding," says Herman Abeyta, one of two program directors for adult services in the Colorado prison system.

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On the first day of The Forum, course leader David Norris, a former literature professor, stands toe-to-toe with an angry inmate named Gator who is serving his third term.

Seventy-seven other inmates, with names like T-Bone and Moose, are gathered in a large nondescript room inside the prison watching in disbelieving amusement as 5-foot-9, 150-pound Norris takes on the 6-foot-3, 230-pound Gator.

"You chose a character a long time ago to play out your life story," Norris tells Gator. "In your story, you're winning. Never mind that it's been costing you quite a bit in your real life. You were pretending with yourself and then you forgot you were just pretending. But in The Forum, the act dies."

"There's going to be a breakthrough in your life," Norris says as he turns to the inmates. "We're going to have a conversation unlike any you've had in your life. We're going to transform your life for the rest of your life."

The inmates laugh. Their unruly cat-

calls express skepticism that this so-called "breakthrough" will turn around their lives.

"Fish can't see the water until they're out of the water," Norris says. "The water we swim in is a sea of human beings. Pull yourself out of the water and you'll have an insight as a human being."

"You're going to get the rug pulled out from under you. Everyone is going to get the rug pulled out about who you think you are. Everything you've been sitting on in your whole life is going to come up. By the time we're done, you'll have a new dimension."

It's not easy, Norris warns. The inmates will go through 60 hours of emotional torture. In the 4-1/2 days, they will miss lunch and mail call.

"We're going to be looking at things you've never looked at before," Norris says. "The stuff we're working on is pretty tough stuff. There will be emotion, anger, sadness and fear. I promise you discomfort. If you can't handle it, get out."

Seventy-eight inmates, including convicted murderers, are selected through a lengthy interview process from a pool of 150 volunteers. They are questioned by Forum leaders on their commitment to redirect their lives. Fifty-eight will finish the seminar.

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"The 'breakthrough' is an awakening," Tattoo says at the end of the program. "It's like puncturing the bottom of a barrel and all your anger, hate and rage starts seeping out. I got rid of every ounce of hate I had built up over an entire lifetime."

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"I hated my father with a passion," he says. "He abused me and my whole family. We were migrant workers moving wherever the work was. My father was an alcoholic. I never really knew him. Not until I was adopted later did I know what a father was. The days that kids spend sitting on their fathers' laps or helping wash their car, I spent in warehouses with my mom looking for my dad. I tried to kill my father a couple of times. I manipulated anyone I could to get to my father."

"I never knew I was carrying this around since I was 5 years old. I'm 28 now. It's controlled me for 23 years."

"For the first time in your life," Tattoo says, "you sit down and think what's given you this corrosive character, the ability to be this cancer to humanity. You have to be so sick of yourself and who you are that you really want this program. All it is, is a simple conversation, a conversation that wakes you up to reality. It takes courage to face up to the bad side of you – what you did and why you did it. Usually the reason is so simple."

"In the 'breakthrough,' there are no answers. Only hope," Tattoo says. "I had a vision of that small boy that promised himself he was going to hurt his father. Now it doesn't matter if I hurt him. You only got one life."

Michael Lewis, 29, has been locked up for five years for armed robbery and attempted murder. He will be eligible for parole in 1994.

The program, he says, "showed me everything I was chasing in life was an illusion. I was chasing the illusion of materialism – the fine clothes, the car, the nice things of life. That's not important to me now."

Lewis says he was a technical engineer for a Denver TV station at the time of the robbery. "The salary should have been sufficient. In the daytime, I was straight-laced and went to work every day. In the nighttime, I was involved in criminal activity," he says.

"I have a whole different concept of life now. The things I chased before don't matter. This showed me who I thought I was and who I really am. It's not like yesterday I was a bad guy and today I'm a good guy. It's a different realization. I've chosen to pursue this

for the rest of my life. I intend to do follow up seminars. It's made this 24-year sentence worth doing and that's saying a lot."

Other inmates talk of a new confidence and a new-found ability to articulate their feelings.

One prisoner, who faced the parole board two weeks ago, says, "The words were just there. I didn't have to think about it. They asked me to state my number and I thought that file with my number on it is not me anymore. It's someone else."

Another says, "I used to practice what I was going to say in any conversation. Now I don't have to practice who I am."

One inmate recalls a recent phone conversation with his girlfriend. "She started pushing the buttons to get a reaction out of me. But I changed the record. I think we started a whole new relationship."

Others are thankful. "I'm in prison," one inmate understates. "But I'm free. Thanks again."

Another says, "I felt value from the sun setting over the mountains last night. For the first time I can remember, I was thankful for living."

Says another prisoner, recalling a conversation with a prison guard, "I felt an intense high because I was able to get my point across."

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The Forum is a motivational training seminar typically attended by affluent professionals. Developed by San Francisco businessman Werner Erhard, it has been presented to 600,000 people in 120 countries for 17 years, Norris says. "We don't know that it works forever," he says. "We know that it's worked for 17 years."

Corporate executives, educators and military officers are among those who pay \$595 to take the seminar to achieve greater personal effectiveness.

The Forum made its prison debut two years ago in the State Prison of Southern Michigan in Jackson, Mich. – the world's largest walled prison.

Preliminary results show a 48 percent decrease of repeat prison violations for the 204 participants, says Peggy LaMarre, a clinical social worker for the Michigan prison system. Colorado is

the second prison system to try The Forum.

LaMarre took The Forum as a civilian seven years ago and was so impressed with its potential for inmates that she brought it into the Michigan prison. "I saw that it has a lasting effect," she says. "That it provides people with a new way to be." Now she wants to see the program in prisons nationwide.

"What we're after ultimately is to stop building prisons, to have prisoners become productive, contributing members of society," she says. "The Forum opens up the possibility for prisoners to lead their lives, to be responsible for society. But we don't have a magic wand. They have to make it happen themselves."

Colorado prison officials are desperately seeking solutions to the overcrowded conditions.

In April, representatives of Prison Possibilities outlined The Forum program for Colorado Department of Corrections officials.

"The timing is right," says Jack Ludlow, a DOC program director for adult services. "The fact that people are looking at themselves and identifying the problems that brought them here is very encouraging."

Buena Vista prison Superintendent Warren Diesslin says, "I don't know what occurred. But I'm a little shocked and surprised at the dialogue I've heard and that doesn't normally happen in prison."

The stated benefits of the program – reduced recidivism, a more economical prison system, fewer victims and increased productivity – are easily understood. But they are not so easily measured.

"Right now, all we can go on is observations of people who see them (participating inmates) all the time," DOC's Abeyta says. "Are they willing to take advantage of the programs offered them in prison? We'll also track them in the streets to see if they respond differently to parole than they did the last time, especially the guys who have been career criminals. We're looking for things that work."

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